

# The new Barcelona Design Museum

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Next year Barcelona will inaugurate its new Design Museum in the Plaça de les Glòries, a vibrant cultural district in the city centre which is also home to the National Theatre, the Auditorium, the Museum of Music and the 22@ technological innovation hub. The Museum of Design project has had a long, complicated history, dating back two decades.

The process was launched some twenty years ago by the architect Oriol Bohigas, who was then the director of Culture of the City Council of Barcelona (1991-1994). With an expert's knowledge of the city's artistic heritage, and well aware of the difficulties facing the museums that housed collections of decorative and applied arts – the Museums of Decorative Arts, Ceramics, Textile and Clothing, and Graphic Arts – Bohigas proposed a thorough reassessment of the role of these institutions as the twentieth century came to an end.

The history of these museums goes back to 1932. The great Catalan museum expert, Joaquim Folch i Torres (1886-1963), was responsible for bringing together the decorative art collections of the Museum of Decorative Arts in the [Royal Palace of Pedralbes](#), which came under the jurisdiction of the City Council after the proclamation of the Republic in 1931. With the Statute of Autonomy of 1932, the museums of Barcelona were reorganized and on 18 December of that year the Museum of Decorative Arts was officially inaugurated in the Palace of Pedralbes.

After the war, in 1949, the museum was relocated to the *Palau de Virreina* on the Ramblas, and remained there until 1986 when the building became home to the City Council's Department of Culture. In 1994 the museum returned to Pedralbes and was open to the public until December 2012, when it closed down in preparation for the move to the Plaça de les Glòries. But its successive relocations are not the most important feature of its history: what is really interesting is how the increase in its stocks continually obliged the museum to adapt to new situations.

Over the years certain collections grew considerably, especially thanks to large donations like the Rocamora costume donation in 1935, and the Alcora

Design Hub Building Barcelona.  
Photo: Lourdes Jansana.



<sup>1</sup> In fact this museum was originally the Section of Popular Engraving of the Ethnology Museum (1942); it then became the Museum of the Book and the Graphic Arts (1974), the Museum of Graphic Arts (1988) and since 2008 it has been the Cabinet of Graphic Arts.

ceramic collection left by Francisca Roviraltà in 1965, to name just two representative cases. The pieces donated were divided thematically and assigned to a set of new museums: the Textile Museum opened in 1961, the Ceramics Museum in 1966, the Lace Museum in 1968, the Carriage Museum in 1970, and the Museum of Books and the Graphic Arts in 1974<sup>1</sup>. In the 1990s the Palace of Pedralbes once again became home to the Ceramics Museum (1990) and the Museum of Decorative Arts (1995), the starting-point of our story – and later to the Textile and Costume Museum (2008), and the Cabinet of the Graphic Arts (2008).

The transfer of the pieces to the new site is already in progress, although the whole operation is expected to take a year and a half. Taking advantage of the move, the museum has organized an overhaul of the collections to ensure that they reach their new destination in the best possible condition. Their new location – state of the art compact storage areas designed especially for the purpose – covers an area of some 2000 sq m. The entire space has been carefully adapted by the Department of Collections to house over 70,000 items in the most diverse formats, from a carriage to a set of earrings, in a vast range of materials – polychrome wood, silk or synthetic resins – all of which have specific storage requirements of their own.

Over its 80 years of history, this public heritage has grown steadily thanks to donations from members of the public, collectors, artists, designers and creators. Their generosity has made a vital contribution to the growth and preservation of the country's history, and now the collections have an ideal setting for their preservation.

BKF chair, 1938-1939, Austral Group. MADB 135.390. Photo: Rafael Vargas.





Dress. Spain, 1966,  
Cristóbal Balenciaga.  
MTIB 109.881.



2 The commissioners were  
Marta Montmany, Josep  
Mañà and Pilar Vélez.

Bohigas's initial proposal, in 1994, led to the organization of an exhibition entitled *Decorative Arts in Barcelona. Collections for a museum*<sup>2</sup>. For the first time people began to talk about the culture of objects and the importance of material culture in civilization, recovering and updating the philosophy of its founder, Folch i Torres. Largely neglected until that time, the stocks were now studied in great detail in order to demonstrate the value of this heritage to the city. The chronological development of the pieces was also traced, bringing together all the collections, techniques, materials, creators, and stressing the importance of their social role. The project was a notable success and it now embarked on a new stage, with two main objectives: the inclusion of all

Mosaic The chocolate feast,  
Barcelona, 1710. MC 52770.









Hall 0. Design Hub Building  
Barcelona. Photo: Lourdes Jansana.

the museums, under the leadership of Jordi Pardo, who worked closely with the technical staff of the museums and with external experts, with Marta Montmany at the helm; and second the construction of its new site, designed by the studio MBM Arquitectes.

The remarkable creativity of Barcelona throughout its history, and especially since the industrial expansion of the nineteenth century and the development of industrial design in the twentieth, has produced an impressive array of museum pieces. This variety gave rise to an initial proposal based on a cross-sectional, multidisciplinary interpretation of the collections under the name of Museum of Design in Barcelona, which generated considerable debate. In 2006, with Ramon Prat as commissioner, the focus of the project changed, and many of the specialists who had worked on the previous stage or were familiar with it considered that the heritage was being undervalued. In 2008 the new project was named the Design Hub Barcelona (DHUB), and people began to talk of the DHUB museums. Inside the programme, experimentation and innovation took on great importance.

Today, our collections, so wide-ranging and rich in meaning, trace the history of the decorative arts up until the twentieth century, a time in which two key developments took place. The first was the emergence of industrial design, which replaced many of the formerly utilitarian objects produced by the decorative arts. The second was the gradual disappearance of the artisan tradition, the blurring of boundaries between the arts and the emergence of contemporary applied arts leading to a new artistic object in the form of pottery, jewellery, enamel, and glass.





3 Initiated in 1992 by Juli Capella and Quim Larrea.

So the twentieth century offers a dual approach to the world of the object. The first perspective sees the object as the product of a combination of design and manufacturing, generally industrial, which is reflected in the museum's Industrial Design Collection, with more than 2,000 objects representative of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries<sup>3</sup>. The second focuses on the artistic object, the product of the creativity of authors who are free to express themselves via any art form or any technique – painting, sculpture, ceramics, glass, or engraving.

Therefore, the museum's new discourse is defined as “From the decorative arts to industrial design and contemporary applied arts”, which allows us another reading from the perspective of aesthetics, based on the composition and types of the collections. Design acts as a link between the historical collections and the research and experimentation currently in progress.

The Barcelona Design Museum brings together the collections of the four museums and bases its philosophy on a cross-sectional reading that engages a variety of different narratives at one and the same time: multidisciplinary and specific stories, studio galleries, workshops, laboratories and new formulas ... without reproducing the division into four separate entities. With the participation of the different sectors involved in the culture of the object, the museum aspires to goals beyond the mere conservation of heritage, which is, nonetheless, the cornerstone of the entire project.

The museum promotes both research and dissemination of knowledge of the past and innovation through all kinds of temporary and permanent exhibitions





Museum Night. Auditorium.  
Design Hub Building, Barcelona.  
May 2013. Photo: Xavier Padrós.

of its collections, through activities both in situ and online, through its publications, via the Internet, and so on. And as the Catalan saying goes: *Roda el món i torna al Born*: roughly, we have come back to our roots, as we have recovered the initial sense of the 1932 object, although necessarily adapted to the reality of 2013.

The name “Museum of Design” may not be a faithful expression of its content – from traditional decorative arts to digital production – but its setting, the design of the twentieth century, is a cultural and socio-economic environment in which Barcelona has always had a great deal to say. Heritage, research and innovation constitute the triple base of the new project. ●